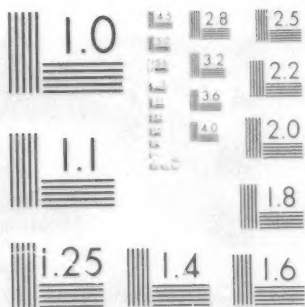




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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an approach to teaching students to become more sensitive to voice, audience, and meaning in fiction. Examined are several passages of monologue, including a passage spoken by a character named Mr. Tyler in the opening of E.M. Forster's "The Story of a Panic." The rhetorical triangle made up of speaker, audience, and subject is discussed, and it is recommended that students become close observers of these factors in fiction.
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FROM THE STUDENT AS WATSON TO THE STUDENT AS HOLMES:
an APPROACH TO FICTION

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In his introduction to his anthology of short stories The Modern Tradition, Daniel Howard talks about "tricky narrators" who try to "mesmerize us," about others who "would limit our seeing," and about "apparently dumb narrators who cannot find their story in the facts that comprise it."¹ Howard's suggestion to students is that they become "all-seeing, detective-like observor[s]" who will "have the fun of finding significance in spite of the participant's lack of understanding." The metaphor is a fertile one. Much modern fiction, in fact the act of reading itself, may be said to call upon students to develop a kind of Sherlock Holmes technique, not, to be sure, the strictly logical, deductive, systematic technique that Watson so much admired, but something like what is involved in Holmes's correction of Watson's "I can see nothing" with "On the contrary, Watson, you can see everything. You fail, however, to reason from what you see. You are too timid in drawing your inferences."² Students too see everything and are not at all timid in drawing inferences to size up new people and situations every day. They have the ability, for example, to infer personality from body movement, emotion from intonation, and intention from what people don't say. But in a classroom, meeting clues of these same kinds in a book rather than in the flesh, students are inclined to believe that they see nothing, to be taken in by transparent devices that in real life they would be too smart for. It is my job as a teacher to move them to a consciousness of themselves as reasoning from what they see, to move them from a literalistic,

¹(2nd ed.; Boston: Little, Brown, 1972), p. xviii.

²"The Blue Carbuncle."

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cliche-ridden, straight-seeing view of a fictional world to an active, curious, skeptical, insightful one, to enable them, in short, to become aware of themselves as Watsons who are capable of becoming Holmeses.

The area in which I work is language, putting students in a position to focus on and analyze word choice, arrangement, rhythm and length of thoughts, juxtapositions, repetitions--all those devices which create personae. Through becoming sensitive to the speaker's voice, students have the opportunity to discover and apply concepts of tone and distance that enable them to reconstruct the "self" of the narrator from his language. The promising thing about this process is that it goes beyond the unmasking of Howard's "tricky" and "dumb" narrators. It is a process that can equip my students to be better readers of all fiction, of all literature. Even in works where there is no personalized narrator, a Holmesian reader is distinctly better than a Watsonian one. Every author is constantly clue-dropping; every fictional work is an artistic construct that needs re-creating in the reader's imagination; and in every work of literature the finding of significance is the name of the game.

My way of beginning to move my students from being Watsons to a consciousness of themselves as Holmeses is to help them recognize that they already know--without knowing that they know--a great deal about detecting in ordinary life, simply by being senders and receivers of language. Therefore I start with the sort of discourse which may be counted upon to be familiar to everyone, the unpremeditated speaking voice of a man or woman: a Martha Mitchell, one of Studs Terkel's laborers talking in a Chicago bar, or this one:

"Amherst is ruined by that university. Only state in the union that didn't vote for Nixon. That was a disgrace!

"He ran for vice-president that first time. They investigated him thoroughly and they found that he was honest as the day is long. Now leopards don't change their stripes! He's still honest!

"Those people that have been trying to do him in ought to be drowned or sent to Siberia. I don't know which I would do to 'em, but one of those things. It's wicked. They

take the best man they've ever had and bother him the way they do.

"It slows down the government, it's bad for the country. It's bad for the world."

The voice is that of 74-year-old Miss Margery Snow of Lewiston, Massachusetts, member of a well-known and long-established local family, being interviewed by a young male reporter on the occasion of Lewiston's bicentennial celebration. The short sentences, peppered with strong opinion words ("ruined," "disgraced," "best man they've ever had") and the exasperated, no-nonsense tone project an image of superiority, but superiority leavened with a sense of humor. The impression is that of a woman vigorous, forthright, and lovably crusty. Her tone in the shuffle she performs with Nixon's critics, for example, suggests that she is aware of her extremism, but also that she is, as an old lady, entitled to certain privileges. Her possibly humorous mixing of metaphors ("leopards don't change their stripes") and her sweeping terms ("the country," "the world," the all-purpose "they," the undefined "it") suggest impatience with niggardly detail. In sum, all these characteristics (rhetorical strategies, really) work to create a certain kind of persona, one which my students can quickly recognize and find correlatives for in their own worlds of experience.

But there is a difference between this same Miss Snow's speaking voice and her writing voice. In an excerpt from her autobiography, which appeared in the same issue of the local newspaper, she tells about having gone to an apartment house she rents out to students:

I went to apartment number 2 of the Halfway House looking for Arlene.

A nice boy let me in. He was sleeping on the couch in the living room. He said the girls had let him sleep there as he had had no transportation back to Amherst . . . the night before. I then ventured into the next large room. It

had two wide mattresses on the floor. A black boy was on one; a blond girl on the other. Raising herself up on her elbow, she said:

"We're sleeping on separate mattresses. You've got nothing on me."

Well, I observed silently as I went on to the other room, neither did she on herself.

In one way, of course, the voice here is still that of Miss Snow, but she is hardly the same Miss Snow we heard popping off about Nixon Agonistes. The written language creates another self. Part of the difference is the result of the writer's use of a consciously "appropriate" writing style, noticeable in the uncolloquial verbs ("ventured" and "observed"), the self-conscious participial construction ("Raising herself up on her elbow"), and the sophisticated rhythm and timing of the last sentence ("Well, I observed silently, neither did she on herself"). Also, as a writer, Miss Snow has more carefully shaped her material to the end of making a point, and she rigorously excludes everything that does not contribute to it. As in the interview about Nixon, here too she demonstrates her moral superiority, but it is a superiority of a different kind, more conscious, better supported by what she considers evidence. Perhaps the most interesting and most important difference between Margery Snow's speaking and writing voices is the change in the distance between herself and her audiences. No longer is she speaking to a young male reporter whom she might enjoy shocking. The audience created by her autobiography is illimitable, unknown, and timeless. Instead of presenting herself as vinegary and eccentric, Miss Snow works hard to appear wise and self-controlled, even sympathetic. When she calls the boy in the living room "nice" and then details his apology, the effect is to create a reader who admires and shares Margery Snow's old-fashioned values. And to place a black on one mattress and a rude (and naked) blond girl on the other

is to make a very special use of the ad hominem rhetorical strategy: inter-racial relations are condemned through a condemnation of bad manners.

After I have had my students create, through Holmesian observation, these two different personae of Miss Snow, I take up the question of the extent to which it is possible to detect truth or reality here. Can either persona be labeled as the real Miss Snow? Of course, as I lead the students to see by asking them to, it is not possible. Both the speaking and the writing Miss Snow unconsciously manipulate their viewpoints and modulate their tones to suit their audiences and situations. Nor can we be any more certain of the reliability ("truth") of the data. Can we really believe, for example, that Miss Snow walked out of the bedroom when she found the girl and boy together, saying nothing? Are we supposed to? And did the girl really say what Miss Snow puts in her mouth: "We're sleeping on different mattresses; you've got nothing on me"? To my ear that sounds less like something that nameless blond would say than an invention of Miss Snow's to set up her silent retort: "Neither has she on herself." But there is no outside "reality" on which to base a judgment about what "really" happened, no data with which either to refute or to validate Miss Snow's version. I invite my students to see that, since this is the only intelligence involved in the discourse, the most we can say of the Snow Version of things is that this is how someone perceives something that has happened. Miss Snow is reporting not on an external world of "facts" and events but on her own internal world.

Once my students have found that there can be no data from which to judge the "real self," no "reality" indeed to talk about, they are ready to move into the much more complex rhetorical situation which complicates the interpretation of first-person fiction. I again use Miss Snow, this time as

a bridge, by describing what we have been dealing with so far as a rhetorical situation that can be seen in terms of a triangle, one point of which is Miss Snow the speaker or writer; another, her audience; and the third, her subject or meaning--the significance of what she says. What, I ask, would be the difference in the way we read Miss Snow's language if we knew that an author named Norman Mailer or Saul Bellow had invented her? To shift the question: what differences exist in our perceptions when we read the dialogue or narrative of a Moll Flanders, a Molly Bloom, an Eliza Gant? In one sense, my students discover that what they found about Margery Snow is still valid: that from her language we can construct the "self" (and only that self) she is presenting at the moment. But the voice of Moll or Molly or Eliza is not an unmediated one; it has an intelligence behind it, a creator. And whereas with a real Margery Snow, who has selected her own diction, arrangement, and details to create a self for an audience, we can never be sure to what extent the characteristics we discover are there, and whereas a real Margery Snow's intention or motive may be complex beyond analysis, here we have an author controlling what his character reveals about herself. Instead of the simple rhetorical triangle made up of speaker, audience, and subject, the rhetorical situation needs two triangles to describe it: an outer triangle embracing an inner one. The inner one we see is the Miss Snow triangle greatly simplified: narrator, audience, and subject. The outer triangle is similar. At one point, creating his own reality, his own world, is the author (or, as Wayne Booth calls him, the "implied author"³) --the author we meet through his language in this particular work (for, like Margery Snow, or any of us, he has many selves). Another point of the triangle is the implied author's audience, his reader, one who can see him

³The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 1961), pp. 71-76 and passim.

gesticulating and pointing over his characters' heads. Of course the author's audience, in first-person narration, ranges from being very close to being very far from the audience created by the narrator in the inner triangle. The third point on the outer triangle is the author's subject, what his story is "about," a meaning quite different from the naive narrator's point and meaning. It is in spelling out the interaction between these two triangles that fictional detection hits pay dirt, and if I have worked carefully, my students have the critical vocabulary, the critical attitude, and the knowledge of how language creates a mind moving through its own reality, to be able to deal with this interaction. Indeed, they are able to deal with the persona, tone, and attitude of any of Daniel Howard's "tricky," "limited," and "apparently dumb" narrators.

Here, for instance, is a voice from the opening of E. M. Forster's "The Story of a Panic":

Eustace's career--if career it can be called--certainly dates from that afternoon in the chestnut woods above Ravello. I confess at once that I am a plain, simple man with no pretensions to literary style. Still, I do flatter myself that I can tell a story without exaggerating, and I have therefore decided to give an unbiased account of the extraordinary events of eight years ago.

The voice is that of a middle-aged Englishman, Mr. Tytler, one of a group of English people staying at an Italian hotel, who tells of a picnic in the course of which a sluggish, underdeveloped boy of fourteen or fifteen, Eustace, is completely transformed by a strange wind that sweeps the woods. Working with Mr. Tytler's voice in much the same way they analyzed Margery Snow's, my students find that whereas they could only speculate, in dealing with Miss Snow's narrative, on the degree of her humor, asperity, and so forth, in Forster's story they can be sure that the qualification in the first sentence ("if career it can be called"), the fussiness of "Still, I do flatter myself

that I can tell a story without exaggerating," the self-satisfaction of "I am a plain, simple man," and the possible self-deception of "I have therefore decided to give an unbiased account" have all been put there intentionally. These uses of language are intended to reveal the speaker's persona, meaning that it is not that we may read his characteristics this way, but as good Holmesian readers we are obliged to. I also make sure my students note the clues pointing to Tytler's fictional audience: a public that know who Eustace is because they have followed his "career." The matter of tone I take up by asking my students to discover, from Tytler's language, whether he addresses this audience as a friend from Eustace's past, as a gossip, as a disinterested historian, or as something else. Is his implied value system at all like Margery Snow's? Does he, like her, "create" an audience who unquestioningly value the old-fashioned virtues? Is his tone in fact something like this: "You know and I know, dear reader, that this young man is enjoying a rather shocking popularity, but when I tell you how it all started eight years ago, you will see how right I was to try to save him"? Perhaps my students will imagine Eustace as the Edwardian age's equivalent of today's rock star, his magnetism as complete a mystery to Tytler's generation as that of the rock star is to the parents of today's teen-agers. To examine the third point on the inner triangle, the subject or meaning of Tytler's story, I ask my students to examine what he chooses to tell, what attitudes he expresses and implies, what his "message" seems to be. Finally, to tie up these three points--to see, in short, how Tytler's persona, tone, and attitude work together in his rhetoric--is to lay bare Tytler's stuffy, wrong-headed, and finally banal character in such a way that my students will easily find correlatives for him in their own experience, just as they did for the voice of Miss Margery Snow.

Tytler's judgments in the story are, to the astute reader, all suspect. His shockingly insensitive opinion of poor Italians--"It is no good speaking delicately of that class" --my students find as transparent as Margery Snow's attitudes toward Amherst students and Congressional critics of Richard Nixon. And the narrator's prejudiced attitude toward the Italian boy Gennaro, which leads, finally, to Gennaro's death and Eustace's bolt for freedom, my students easily detect in "Gennaro was a stop-gap waiter, a clumsy, impertinent fisher-lad, who had been had up from Minori in the absence of the nice English-speaking Emmanuele." (Can they miss the implication that it was his English-speaking that made Emmanuele "nice"?) And the fact that Tytler completely misunderstands the significance of Eustace's conversion experience, they see revealed in Tytler's remark on seeing Eustace striding "manfully" along after being affected by the strange wind: "I observed with satisfaction to Miss Mary Robinson that Eustace was at last taking some pride in his personal appearance." From these clues students discover that Tytler lacks moral and spiritual insight, and that his self-satisfaction keeps him from imagining aspects of life he does not already know.

But why choose Tytler as narrator at all? What qualities does he have that Forster needed? In one way, of course, he is a good narrator because he is both unemotional and a stickler for detail (the "proper" name for this valley, he tells us, is Vallone Fontana Caroso), so that, when he reports what happened at the time of the supernatural incident and later during the confusion at the hotel, we can be sure that he is reliably telling us what went on, even if he is unaware of the significance. More importantly, through/question~~ing~~^{being ed} why Tytler is the narrator, students have a chance to discover the theme of the story. It is, they find, precisely Tytler's narrow attitude toward life--rationalistic,

unimaginative, conventional--that Forster thinks makes English boys like Eustace "pale," "under-developed," and (in Tytler's biased language) "indescriminably repellent," qualities shared, to some extent, by all the English tourists. The "Italians, on the other hand, are portrayed as open, free, subject to non-rational forces. The contrast, then, is between what the English and Italian cultures represent, and it is the non-rational forces that have saved Eustace from growing up like the rest of his countrymen and that presumably account for his later "career," mysteriously alluded to in the opening paragraph and in one other short passage. Forster thus conveys his meaning, even though it is Tytler that tells every word in the story; he conveys it, that is, when the reader plays his part as detective.

I have detailed at some length my rhetorical approach to this little-known story by E. M. Forster because the story is not so transparent that every reader--even every experienced reader--can handle without help what Daniel Howard calls the trickiness of this kind of narration, yet it is an easy one to work with and yields richly.

But Forster's story is only one of many pieces of literature that can be used for the same purposes. One might begin instead with a short narrative or dramatic poem, such as Browning's "My Last Duchess" or "Soliloquy in a Spanish Cloister" and proceed to any of the frequently anthologized short stories which have fallible first-person narrators: "Why I Live at the P.O." by Eudora Welty; Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener"; Conrad's "The Secret Sharer" or "Ypouth"; Malamud's "Black Is My Favorite Color"; Sherwood Anderson's "Death in the Woods," "I Want to Know Why," or "The Egg"; "Sonny's Blues" by James Baldwin; Camus's "The Fall"; and--perhaps the prime example--Ring Lardner's

"Haircut."

It is also possible to use this technique to go beyond the fallible first-person narrator to third-person fiction in which the narrator is not obviously a presence. Here I ask from whose perspective or in whose language the story is told; I invite my students to locate the focus of sensibility, the reflecting mind. If the narrator's voice is a tough one like Hemingway's, what effect does that toughness have on the meaning? If the narrator's voice talks with the vocabulary of one of the characters, as it does in Joyce's "Clay," does that limited vocabulary limit his seeing? And, of all dialogue, I ask what the various voices are revealing about themselves that they don't know they are revealing. I insist that my students test out Mark Harris's statement: "I allow my reader to eavesdrop on my people, and sometimes they will tell the truth and sometimes they will lie, and you must determine for yourself when they are doing which."⁴

Sensitivity to voice, audience, and meaning, finally, extends to all literature. No voice is neutral; no author speaks to all audiences. And no meaning worth grasping is ever handed out of the page to the reader as a gift. But to students equipped with deerstalker's cap and magnifying glass, it is there to be discovered.

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⁴"Essay Does It Not," in The Living Novel: A Symposium, ed. Granville Hicks (New York, 1957), p. 117, quoted in Booth, p. 8.